



Commissioner's Comments

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Kentucky Commissioner of Education

January 22, 2016

Equity, Achievement, Integrity

This was an important week for education in Kentucky and for me personally as I presented the first State of K-12 Education in the Commonwealth report.

I have watched Kentucky from afar for the past decade and was always impressed with the work and commitment to improving education opportunities for students. For the past 3 months, I've been digging deeper to learn more about our system. I can tell you it has lived up to and even exceeded my expectations.

As I announced on Thursday, the state of education in the Commonwealth is strong. I felt it was important to share where we are in education currently, so we released a report that provides full picture – both good and not so good – of where we are education as we start off 2016. The report may be accessed [here](#).

So, what is next? How do we move forward? As I shared this week, I have built my education priorities on three pillars: equity, achievement and integrity. These three pillars have always been paramount to me because they make a real difference in the lives of children. That is why I plan to also make them the pillars of Kentucky's education work from this point on.

First, there is equity. Equity cannot be something we just give lip service to. Equity is something that we all must give our effort, our commitment, and our very passion to in order to ensure every child has the opportunity for a high quality education, and is equipped to make any life choice they want after high school graduation. While we have provided greater access for students to advanced placement, higher level coursework and quality instruction, we have not overcome the simple reality that we have a large achievement gap. We must continue to shift our thinking and our instruction to meet the needs of a greater diversity of learners than we have ever had before. Equity means opportunities for all students and I plan to do everything in my ability to ensure this.

Achievement is about how students perform, but it must be more than that. Ensuring all students achieve at high levels has been an earmark for Kentucky for years. Our students have proven they can rise to the occasion with demonstrated improvement in achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the ACT as compared with the nation as a whole. We cannot let up. To be clear, we cannot be solely concerned with test scores, but we cannot ignore them either. We also must continue to push for more students to graduate from high school. We have made remarkable progress in this area with an 88 percent graduation rate, among the highest in the nation with all states now using the same four year cohort graduation rate formula as a measure. And our diploma means something – among all the states in the country that require rigorous graduation requirements – four years of English language arts and mathematics through Algebra II for every student, Kentucky is number 1 in its graduation rate, all while raising our expectations and committing to excellence in achievement.

This is bigger than just education. With this many more students graduating and graduating with a quality diploma, it has potential for a tremendous benefit to our overall economy. Each high school graduate contributes a net economic benefit to our economy of \$209,000 through increased government revenues and lowered government spending. This equates to a net economic benefit of approximately \$1.1 Billion. In short, all students achieving at high levels is not just a nice tag line, it is a reachable goal with a big payoff for our students and Kentucky.

Finally, let's consider integrity. When I was in the classroom, I had trouble giving students extra credit because their grade would not honestly reflect what they knew.

One particular situation stands out in my mind. I overheard a group of my AP Chemistry students talking about me as a teacher. One student, who hadn't had me before, boasted about how she had made 108 in a regular chemistry class the year before and how I could not be that bad. The students that had me the previous year told her I was not "bad" as in hard, I simply believed in being clear about what a student understood. Needless to say, my new student soon realized she did not know or understand as much as she thought because of the artificial grade she had made the year before.

The bottom line is that we must be honest with our students, teachers, and parents about achievement. The same applies to our work with low performing schools. It requires an honest approach and requires our schools to be honest with themselves. The ones who have improved have held true to this notion. We have had 15 schools come off the priority list over the past six years and none of them have returned. That is one of the best rates in the country. Why? Because the educators in those buildings are honest and dedicated to ensuring their students get a better education.

I could not be more proud to report that the state of education in the Commonwealth is strong. We have much of which to be proud, but I also recognize we still have a way to go in several areas. I pledge to you, as I have to the Kentucky Board of Education, to continue to build on our successes and address our shortcomings -- all while working cooperatively and with a commitment to equity, achievement, and integrity.

Stephen